

Deconstructing the Dichotomy

In 1985 the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam organized a symposium on a new and challenging theme, i.e. contemporary art from what were at the time referred to as developing countries. Throughout the course of a long day, directors and curators of leading ethnographic and art museums in the Netherlands discussed the possibility of assembling a joint collection. The outcome was somewhat disappointing for the curators of the ethnographic Tropenmuseum; their presentations of current art production in Africa and Asia were met with skepticism and disdain. The representatives of the art museums concluded that the collecting of work

from these regions ought to best be left to the ethnographic museums because such art did not fit the criteria employed in contemporary art discourse. As Jan Debbaut, director of the Van Abbemuseum was to put it, “It is a very specific discourse, which is self generating and embedded in a very specific Western tradition. Whatever is relevant within this discourse is exhibited in museums. It does not matter where art is made,

but whether it is part of art discourse.” Liesbeth Brandt Corstius, director of the Museum of Modern Art in Arnhem, replied: “Well, within the next fifty years I don’t want to show this kind of art in my museum.”¹

Perhaps encouraged by this response, the Tropenmuseum (along with other ethnographic museums in Europe and the United States) has since then taken its first steps along the path of exhibiting and collecting contemporary art. Yet, as past experience has shown, the connection between art and anthropology, which is inherent to the ethnographic approach is, per se, a difficult one. More recently, the globalization of the art world has exposed the growing divide between the discursive boundaries around which the ethnographic museum is built and the universalist claims of contemporary art. This discrepancy is one of the signs of the oft-cited crisis in which the ethnographic museum finds itself. In the post-colonial world the ethnographic museum faces a dilemma with respect to the kind of approach to adopt toward the presentation of the global and the local, the past and the present, knowing that such notions were considered irrelevant when the museum came into being.

Mirjam Shatanawi Contemporary Art in Ethnographic Museums

About twenty years after the above-mentioned symposium, I was invited by *Bidoun*, a magazine specializing in Middle Eastern arts and culture, to contribute a short article on my experiences as curator at the Tropenmuseum, where I have been working since 2001.² My contribution centered on the current crisis of the ethnographic museum, and why across Europe ethnographic museums are either being closed down, merge with art museums or else reinvented as centers for multicultural debate. I argued that although the current crisis may be exacerbated by the forces of globalization, its deeper causes lie in the inability of the ethnographic museum to overcome its colonial past. The dual model on which the Tropenmuseum is based, taken together with its position in the Dutch museum landscape, quite literally divide the world in two: one half observes and owns, while the other is observed and owned. I concluded by noting that, today, ethnographic museums should acknowledge that their ‘other’ does not exist outside the Western realm, and that as a consequence ethnographic museums have never really represented ‘other cultures’ in the first place; they represent Western culture and its particular view of the world.³ The Tropenmuseum can only redeem itself if it succeeds to dissolve this distinction between the West and the rest.

The editors of *Bidoun* explicitly requested examples from exhibition displays, PR and marketing strategies to illustrate this point. As outsiders to the museum world, they wanted to see the residues of a colonial mentality, as employed by the Tropenmuseum, for presenting diverse cultures to its visitors. On closer inspection, however, I began to realize that the heart of the problem lies in the structures according to which the museum is organized. Essentialism is woven into the present-day structure of the Tropenmuseum because the museum deals with its subject by way of a division into distinct geographical regions, each with its own curator, permanent exhibition space and collection. Essentialism is the Tropenmuseum’s core business since it only represents half the globe.

Confronting Globalization

Today, the Tropenmuseum seeks to avert crisis by transforming itself into a cultural history museum. It may be argued that this transformation forms part of a wider trend whereby art museums are assuming the typical characteristics of ethnographic museums and vice versa. The

Tropenmuseum now exhibits works of art from all epochs and places. As a rule, its exhibitions aim at a cross-cultural perspective within which contemporary discourses are juxtaposed and discussed. In contrast to the old ethnographic museum, which treated cultures as collectives, the Tropenmuseum now, like any other cultural history museum, includes an increasing amount of personal stories and individual perspectives as a means of facilitating multiple interpretations. And this is where contemporary art comes in.

Presenting and collecting contemporary art enables the Tropenmuseum to provide a platform for diverse views, including those that take a critical stance toward the museum and the particular discourses on which it is founded. For this reason, the inclusion of contemporary art is often considered to be one of the more constructive approaches for effecting change in ethnographic museums. However, if it does not coincide with a revision of the paradigms that underpin these museums it could also result in a reaffirmation of existing boundaries. At a rudimentary level, the universalist claims of contemporary art run counter to the conventional lines of reasoning and organizational models on which the ethnographic museum is built. What was formerly referred to as non-Western art, today often functions within a global system comprising galleries and dealers, art institutions and criticism (which does not necessarily imply that art is deprived of local significance, but rather that it assumes various meanings according to geographic location). Its subject may or may not refer to local cultural contexts. *documenta 12*, for instance, featured a Malian artist educated in Cuba. His work was a reflection on the conflict between Israel and Palestine and drew on West African textile traditions as well as Conceptualism, a domain formerly seen as exclusively Western. Such a blurring of categories is highly confusing for the ethnographic museum, which derives its *raison d'être* from the compartmentalization of cultures—each culture in its own pigeon-hole—and to such an extent that the inclusion of contemporary art might challenge its very existence.

The Search for the Contemporary

Another primary cause for the ethnographic museums' struggle with globalization is its connection to the contemporary world. In the *Bidoun* article I quote anthropologist Talal Asad who characterizes anthropo-

logical studies of the 1950s, as “a narrative about typical actors ... from which an account of indigenous discourses is totally missing.”⁴ Similarly, in the dramatic staging of cultures in ethnographic museums at that time, the ‘actors’ on display neither spoke nor thought, they only behaved. Objects were used as evidence of societies that never changed. And yet, in spite of the fact that the traditional ethnographic museum displayed cultures as static and timeless, it claimed to present the world *as it now exists*: the contemporary, not the historical, was its main attraction.⁵

Today, the traditional ethnographic museum seems to have lost its curiosity-value. New multicultural audiences, the homogenization of products and processes, increased possibilities for travel and communication are all factors causing that the allure of the exotic can no longer be found by displaying the contemporary world. At the same time, museums which formerly focused exclusively on Western art are now beginning to discover the rest of the world as a place of interest. As a result of these developments, Dutch ethnographic museums no longer constitute the center of debate on non-Western culture, but are being pushed out on to the periphery. Being thus situated, these museums are urged to re-evaluate their fundamental premises and underlying structures. The analysis of the recent Tropenmuseum *Urban Islam* exhibition, which I curated with Deniz Ünsal, may help shed light on this issue.

Urban Islam

Urban Islam was held in 2004 in Amsterdam and then moved to Basel, Switzerland, in 2006. The exhibition set out to explore the modern aspects of Islam in different parts of the world. In order to do so, it presented the individual stories of young adult Muslims living in five cities around the globe [plate 37].

The concept of the exhibition was multilayered. First, a high tower was built at the center of the exhibition. In the tower classical objects from the Tropenmuseum collections were grouped around themes representing the basic principles of Islam, such as the Qur’an and the five pillars of Islam. The tower contained the kind of historical objects that are generally considered to belong to the canon of Islamic material culture. However, in the exhibition’s theoretical concept the tower also stood for a static view of Islam. This view, frequently to be observed in

museum displays, shows many similarities to the prevailing perception in the Dutch discourse on Islam; a perception which generalizes an entire faith by looking for a past that, at a superficial glance, homogenizes rather than investigates specific dynamics and differences in religious practice.

In stark contrast to the static and rigid approach to Islam as represented by the tower were the displays surrounding it: these represented the cities of Dakar, Istanbul, Marrakech, Paramaribo and Amsterdam. In keeping with the Tropenmuseum's new mission as a cultural history museum and its focus on individuality, each city was presented by a young Muslim who offered a glimpse into his or her life by means of sound, image and text. Their stories reflected the highly personal search for an Islamic identity in a rapidly globalizing world. In this way, the exhibition sketched an image of Islamic practices in the context of social and political relations; of personal choices, economic difficulties and globalization in modern urban settings.

As curators of the exhibition, we conceived of *Urban Islam* as our critical statement against the prevailing discussions on Islam and Muslims in the West, and in the Netherlands in particular. We were thus arguing in favor of an approach to religion and society from a human perspective: by focusing on personal stories and experiences in everyday life, we distanced ourselves from a-historical and oversimplified representations of Islam.⁶ However, the objects that we acquired for the *Urban Islam* exhibition, and those which later became part of the Tropenmuseum's permanent collections, paint a completely different picture. Most of the objects were acquired to form part of the exhibition's tower, which contained the type of objects regarded as part of the canon of Islam. There were several contemporary pieces by Middle Eastern artists whose works represent a continuation of classical Islamic arts. These pieces constituted a fitting part of the museum's collections by virtue of their link to the traditional heritage of the Muslim world. The other articles on display, namely, the objects, multimedia clips and images that we collected as part of the personal narratives of the young adult Muslims, were discarded. Now operating in our new capacity as curators for the permanent collections, we considered these items as being too casual, too informal and too personal to be eternally kept. They lacked craftsmanship, originality and exoticism. In other words,



Fig. 1 **Mehmet Gürsoy: *Kelime-i Tevhid*, 2003, Collection Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.**
Photo: courtesy of the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam

there was nothing especially exceptional about them. Evidently, the concept of the Tropenmuseum as a location for the display of daily life among common people had become useless for assembling a contemporary collection. However, the question behind this observation is how the criteria for collecting affect the processes of change within the museum. My analysis of three of the Tropenmuseum's recent acquisitions reveals the assumptions and limitations of the ethnographic approach to collecting contemporary art. Each of these objects represents a position in the debate on representation within the ethnographic museum: reaffirmation, reconsideration or confrontation.

The Art of Reaffirmation

Among the objects we acquired for the *Urban Islam* show, purchased at an Istanbul gallery, was a tile panel by the contemporary ceramic artist Mehmet Gürsoy. While the calligraphic text is a design dating from the 1950s, the style draws on Ottoman calligraphic traditions. The patterns and colors similarly adopt Ottoman ceramic styles [fig. 1]. The practice of classical Ottoman arts was all but abandoned by the late nineteenth century, when Turkish artists began to adopt European styles of painting and sculpture.⁷ By the 1950s, however, a small group of artists initiated a

revival of these classical practices. Currently, only a handful of artists work in the traditional Ottoman styles, and so by no means can Gürsoy's tile panel be considered representative of the Turkish art world. As a reflection of contemporary Turkish society it also fails; this is especially evident when one makes a comparison to the artifacts and images drawn from the life of school teacher Ferhat Duçe, our young avatar from Istanbul, who also featured in the show.

As curators of *Urban Islam* we intended to challenge the conventional ethnographic museum, with its staging of cultures as unchanging and static by displaying personal narratives rather than invariable truths. Yet, the objects that were kept long after the exhibition had been dismantled, implied precisely such a fixed truth, namely, the notion that the Muslim world is trapped by its heritage and engaged in a perpetual struggle between tradition and modernity. But perhaps it was the acquisition of Gürsoy's tile panel, that reflected more than anything else, our struggle with modernity, or in the words of Rasheed Araeen, our failure to come to terms with the modern aspiration in societies other than our own.⁸ It would seem that precisely because we collect objects from a world, which is increasingly approximating our own that we begin searching for what is as far removed from us as possible. The impulses behind existing collections tie us to a past in two senses, namely, to the past of those cultures whose objects we collect and to that of our own history of collecting. The extension of these dynamics to the field of contemporary art almost inevitably implies a link between the contemporary and the traditional, a link, moreover, which is all too often taken for granted.

Museums housing collections of classical art from non-Western regions seem to be constrained by the dictates of their own paradigms: much in the same way that the Tropenmuseum struggles with its colonial past, contemporary art museums remain embroiled in the legacy of Western discourse on art. The British Museum's acquisition of contemporary Middle Eastern art, for instance, was initiated in the mid 1980s. Since then, the British Museum has built up an impressive collection of art works, for the most part on paper. In this case, the guiding principle for collecting is that the works in question make use of Arabic script and, hence, conform to the museum's existing collections of classical Islamic calligraphy. The resulting collection formed the centerpiece of the exhibition *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*, displayed at the

British Museum, in 2006, and at Dubai's International Financial Centre, in 2008. *Bidoun* magazine criticized somewhat harshly the British Museum's curatorial approach for its "passive acceptance of a Victorian model of linear history, of cause and effect, and the apparent confusion between art as a self-conscious, conceptual and intellectual practice and art as an essentially decorative skill." The *Bidoun* reviewer observed with some degree of cynicism, that the museum's perspective on Middle Eastern art fitted neatly with the region's nationalist, state-sanctioned decorative art, thereby excluding "a tremendous amount of the most interesting and dynamic work being produced at the moment."⁹

The background of this remark is the opposition between two differing art scenes in the Middle East. One of them is associated with the state, and its unwieldy management of art spaces and academies, while the other is associated with the private sector, often promoted by independent galleries and curators employing the techniques of global marketing. Generally speaking, while the one produces art works auctioned for regional buyers at renowned auction houses, the other incorporates those artists who exhibit at international biennials and exhibitions (those given a platform in *Bidoun*). This is not all: Firstly, this somewhat caricatured portrayal by no means does justice to the connection between the public and private sectors, since artists tend to shift between the two, often employing strategies for exploiting whatever either sector has to offer them.¹⁰ Secondly, it is important to note the concurrence between each side of the divide in the use of different media. Artists operating on the international circuit are likely to work with media such as video and installation, incorporating styles (Conceptualism) and fashions well received on the international circuit. These are works of art that easily find their way into Western art museum collections. At the other end of the spectrum, those artists who enjoy popularity on the regional circuit, including local art museums, tend to work in sculpture, painting and drawing, namely, in media that were taught at state academies across the Middle East, just as they were abandoned by the West.¹¹ Some incorporate traditional practices, namely, like calligraphy and geometric pattern, precisely those works most desired by Western museums pursuing ethnographic approaches to art since they are congruous with older collections in which similar media and practices are to be found. By focusing on a link to historical methods of collecting, this approach tends to

direct these museums to works of art of a predominantly narrative, figurative and decorative nature. However, as a closer inspection of collecting practices will reveal, the implications extend well beyond medium and formal properties of art.

Unlike the British Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has only recently begun collecting contemporary works by artists from the Middle East. The museum's website announcement informs us that "these artists draw inspiration from their own cultural traditions, using techniques and incorporating imagery and ideas from earlier periods. They are not so much reinventing Islamic art as they are repurposing it so that it becomes more clearly a vehicle for personal expression, freed from the constraints of patronage and functionality."¹² This thesis on the Middle East is based on several assumptions which, taken together, demonstrate a particular view about the Middle East. We again encounter here a perception of a region apparently unable to break free of its past, a perception, moreover, exemplary of a nineteenth century evolutionary theory of history: Middle Eastern cultures must discover modernity—and even freedom in this case—by interacting with the Western concept of art. No less vexing is the uncritical labeling of art from the Middle East as Islamic, thus making religion the principal framework for interpreting the conceptual and stylistic qualities of works of art. Finally, this thesis recycles the notion that if artists work in 'their own' traditions they are necessarily more authentic than they would be were they to go beyond such boundaries. This idea is further elaborated in the museum's description of the use of Arabic script as both an art form and a means of addressing an artist's religious or cultural identity.

The collecting policies of both the British Museum and the LACMA reveal the reliance on a classical ethnographic model, where the work of art becomes an example of a cultural landscape. Art is used as a substitute for objects drawn from daily life such as were formerly collected by the Tropenmuseum, and thus a reflection of political and social realities. In the words of Venetia Porter, curator of *Word into Art*, "This show is an example of how we can use our collections to look at today's world — politics and history—through art."¹³ The difficulty here not only hinges on the use of art as a metaphor for a cultural landscape, but on the combination with colonial models informing the perception of that same cul-

tural landscape. The rigidity of such models excludes other conceptions of art and artists. It commits them to a modernist model of cultural evolution, thereby denying the possibility of their being able to function within different contexts as well as the opportunity to oscillate between these contexts, thus creating new meanings and connections.

The Art of Reconsideration

The Tropenmuseum faced this dilemma when acquiring a work of sculpture by artist Adam Henein in 2006, which has been on display in the permanent Middle East gallery ever since [fig. 2]. Adam Henein is a well-known doyen of Egyptian modernism from the post-independence era.



Fig. 2 Adam Henein: *Umm Kulthum*, 2003, Collection Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. Photo: Barry Iverson, courtesy of Canvas magazine

Educated at the art academies of Cairo and Munich, he has exhibited in many locations in Egypt as well as in Europe and the United States, including the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Despite his international orientation, his work principally achieved recognition on the regional circuit, a circumstance which may come as no surprise when considering the media he employs. Although Henein is best known for his abstract bronze and stone sculptures, he also works in other media, creating large paintings in pigment on papyrus, as well as ink drawings on paper. Thematically, Henein's art does not take inspiration from contemporary Egyptian culture. Again, the sculpture in homage to legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum is an exception. As most of Henein's sculptures, this particular piece is a play of form, which demonstrates a search for the essence of his subject—in this case Umm Kulthum—while still retaining a minimum of form.¹⁴

Forty years ago, when Umm Kulthum was at the peak of her career, Henein's sculpture would not have been added to the Tropenmuseum collections. As an *objet d'art*, it would have been deemed too individual an expression to be representative of an entire culture. Today, it is precisely this that the piece has to offer: its individual interpretation of the collective has enabled the Tropenmuseum to present a multilayered vision of the Arab world. The paradox here is that its location in an exhibition heavily inclining towards a culturist approach to this region, seriously weakens the individuality of its expression and possibility to generate new associations, whether in the field of art history or cultural heritage. Hence, the presence of Henein's sculpture has urged the Tropenmuseum to reconsider its position in the triangle of individualism, collective identity and ethnographic representation, and not only in temporary exhibitions, but also in collecting and permanent displays. Occasionally, such tensions reveal themselves.

The Art of Confrontation

In 2006, the Tropenmuseum organized an exhibition of the works of visual artist Khosrow Hassanzadeh, whose paintings and silkscreen prints also feature in the British Museum collection. Hassanzadeh's artworks are largely figurative and treat of subjects as diverse as the Iran-Iraq war, murdered prostitutes and the Western image of Iran. Partly due to his choice of subject, some people within the art world classify his

work as chador art, art made to please Western preconceptions about the Muslim world. Yet, as an artist, Hassanzadeh defies such simple categorization; his work is exhibited on local, regional and international circuits, is at times kitsch and decorative, while at others conceptual and multilayered. Although a large part of his oeuvre comments on social realities in Iran, Hassanzadeh is wary of being framed as a representative of his native country, a position he shares with many artists from a Middle Eastern background. Considerable controversy arose when the PR department of the publishing house that had issued the exhibition catalogue went on to announce its preference for the title *Iranian Visions*. Several authors threatened to withdraw their contributions from the catalogue, and Hassanzadeh sent an angry message to the publishers stating that he did not agree with what he called “their ethnic marketing strategies.” When writing to them he argued: “Even though your sales will benefit if you insist on the ‘Iranian’ and put, say, Khomeini on the cover, I do not want to be packaged as a national mascot.” His objection was finally accepted and a compromise was found with the title *Tehran Studio Works*. However, when the Tropenmuseum’s PR department argued along the same lines as the publishers by insisting on naming the exhibition *Inside Iran*, Hassanzadeh became disillusioned and stood down.

Hassanzadeh’s frustration with the Tropenmuseum’s marketing strategies stems from his longstanding struggle against the idea that an artist’s national or religious background has an ineradicable effect on an artist’s practice. As with many artists from the region, he argues that terms such as Islamic, Middle East, or even Iran are charged with religious and political subtexts, and that the use of such terms in exhibition concepts draws attention away from the artistic value of his work. However, leaving to one side the question of the marketing appeal of ethnic labeling as a factor in boosting the volume of museum visitors, an even more substantial issue is at stake wherever the work of artists such as Hassanzadeh is exhibited at museums with an ethnographic approach to art.

After the exhibition the Tropenmuseum acquired *Terrorist*, a series of works by Hassanzadeh. In the series comprising four pieces the artist portrays himself, his mother and two of his sisters as terrorists as a means of questioning contemporary Western perceptions which directly associate Islam with terrorism [plate 39]. The four individuals are dis-

played against a backdrop of images relating to their personal religious beliefs. Each piece is accompanied by a label describing the portrayed ‘terrorist’ with characteristics ranging from nationality, religious denomination to personal history. In the artist’s statement accompanying the series, Hassanzadeh writes: “This series is a reflection of a world where the word ‘terrorist’ is thrown about thoughtlessly. What is a terrorist? What are the origins of a terrorist? And in an international context who defines ‘terrorism’? ... In my mind, the work had to pose these questions by cautiously joining the borders of Western and Iranian propaganda. ... It was with this goal that the size of the images became critical. I wanted the pieces to be like the Iranian government propaganda portraits of revolution and war martyrs painted on buildings across the country. I also wanted the size to impose itself upon the viewer—like the constant messages of Western government propaganda streamed into the homes of millions through a reckless 24-hour media machine.”¹⁵

By referring to a particular period in Iranian art history—the revolutionary art produced in the early 1980s—as well as Western visual culture, Hassanzadeh skillfully connects two histories of representation. By doing so, *Terrorist* represents a reclaiming of identity, as Sohrab Mahdavi points out in his review of the series. He argues that although *Terrorist* aims to reclaim the right to self-representation and independence, “it fails on both registers: ‘self-representation’ here is an appropriation of Western values and the work can only become ‘independent’ if the artist’s intended viewer is Western.” Nevertheless, as Mahdavi sees it, this “radical failure” only reinforces the artist’s message.¹⁶

The *Terrorist* series is part of an artistic oeuvre that addresses Western processes of image-making. As much of Hassanzadeh’s work, this series deals with Islam as a common denominator in Western perceptions of Iran.¹⁷ For the Tropenmuseum, the inclusion of this piece in the collections signifies acknowledging a critique of standing museum practices in the production of images of Iran. A recent survey revealed that Islam is also paramount in the museum’s Iranian collections: no less than 19% of the Iranian objects are directly linked to Islamic religion as contrasted with less than 1.5% of the objects from Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim country.¹⁸ What works of art such as *Terrorist* can offer the Tropenmuseum is a strategy that does not simply disregard identity-

based politics, but rather explores its manifestations and seeks to challenge them. In this manner, *Terrorist* re-integrates the West into the Tropenmuseum's current practice.

Reintegrating the West

The background of the acquisition of Hassanzadeh's work by the Tropenmuseum is its status as an ethnographic museum within the Dutch museum landscape. Despite their initial reservations, several Dutch museums of modern art, including Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague as well as, indeed, the Museum of Modern Art in Arnhem, have now begun collecting and exhibiting contemporary art from all over the world.¹⁹ Exhibition halls, such as the Kunsthal and Nieuwe Kerk, exhibit collections of traditional Asian, Middle Eastern and African Art at regular intervals. In contrast to the period around the 1985 symposium, the Tropenmuseum is no longer at the heart but increasingly on the periphery of the debate on non-Western cultures, whereby its marginal position is beginning to open up new perspectives. In the past, ethnographic museums contributed to creating the notion of otherness by tirelessly collecting, classifying, arranging and re-arranging the other. As aptly discussed by Olu Oguibe in *The Culture Game*, the appetite for difference and exoticism and the consequent struggle with 'authenticity' has recently shifted to Western art institutions.²⁰ At the same time, the rise of the concept of global art also implies a search for de-ethnification. The center of the canonization process is gradually being occupied by other museums, and thus the Tropenmuseum may now assume the role of critical outsider, a discursive space whereby the cultural canon is put to the test. If the museum sees itself as a platform for debate, a place in which old certainties are questioned and new connections explored, it is now time to reconsider assumed categories.

The most fundamental of these categories is the division between Western and non-Western cultures. Hence, with its roots in a specific geopolitical context, i.e. colonialism, this division was devised to facilitate the supremacy of a group of countries or cultures over others. Even today, in the so-called era of the class of civilizations the division is, above all, a political construct. Quoting Kwame Anthony Appiah, Susan Legêne, head of the curatorial department of the Tropenmuseum, sug-

gested at the ICOM General Conference of 2007 that museums ought to encourage their visitors “to experience imaginary connections,” not through identity but despite difference.²¹ As Appiah sees it, the connection to art through local identity is as imaginary as through a global concept of humanity: “We can respond to art that is not ours; indeed, we can fully respond to ‘our’ art only if we move beyond thinking of it as ours and start to respond to it as art.”²² Should the Tropenmuseum wish to be a place in which visitors are able to establish relations to art by means of a range of imaginary connections, it must then seek to break the dichotomy.

The Tropenmuseum’s collecting policy for 2008 through 2012 translates this notion into the decision of not basing its criterion for selection on the basis of a given artist’s nationality or ethnicity, as was formerly the case.²³ Art works from all over the world qualify for acquisition so long as they address the museum’s thematic focus, namely, the history and cultures of Asia, Africa and Latin America. At the same time, the museum staff is presently engaged in debating the future course of the museum: should it remain based on regional divisions or change to a thematic approach? Although these internal developments signify a gradual shift towards the renewed inclusion of the West into the former ethnographic museum, is this sufficient?

Of course, collecting contemporary art enables the Tropenmuseum to keep collecting the modern world. However, in the long run this shift in policy will further undermine the ability of the museum to function as a distinct entity, where so-called other cultures are put on display—if for no other reason than contradicting the theoretical assumptions of such a collecting policy. Olu Oguibe proposes the reclamation of terrain in order to counteract the otherization in current art discourse.²⁴ Likewise, the artist Hassan Khan remarks: “If contemporary art is an absolutist term, which it is, then there are no ‘other places’ to begin with. To frame them as such is to push them out of the actual production of knowledge. The knowledge that is produced here sees itself as an absolute discursive field. ... Seeing as, at this point, there’s little chance of demolishing this field, what might be more interesting is to go right at its heart and say, ‘this is MY discursive field, not a field that I am ‘Other’ in some way.’”²⁵ Extended to the field of ethnographic collections of arts and crafts, such an approach would mean giving way to more open-minded, less restric-

tive, contexts within which these artifacts may function, whether under the heading of history, art, design or material culture.

Oguibe and Khan argue for the deconstruction of discursive power by ostracizing those age-old notions that have today resulted in processes of inclusion and exclusion. Appiah calls for the new appropriation of difference to make new connections possible. Either way, in the integrative movement that follows from these lines of thought—as far removed from reality as they may now seem—there will be no role for the ethnographic museum, or for the art museum for that matter, as they operate at present. Dissolving the dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’ will ultimately bring an end to the independent existence of any museum devoted to such a dichotomy, a practice by which it effectively curates itself out of business. As for the Tropenmuseum, the more constructive approach to future developments would be to further explore the intersections and discrepancies between art, history and anthropology. Perhaps, in this way the former ethnographic museum will discover a meaningful role for itself as an institution within the processes of integration currently at work in the art world.

Notes

- 1 Paul Faber and Harrie Leyten, *Studiedag moderne kunst in niet westerse landen*, April 18, 1985, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, 1985, unpublished.
- 2 Cf. Mirjam Shatanawi, "Tropical Malaise," in: *Bidoun*, 10, (spring) 2007, pp. 42–4.
- 3 Cf. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1988.
- 4 Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Occasional Papers), Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Washington, 1986, p. 8.
- 5 Cf. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1983.
- 6 Mirjam Shatanawi and Deniz Ünsal, "Urban Islam: Rethinking the Familiar," in: *ISIM Newsletter*, 14, (June) 2004, p. 44.
- 7 Cf. Günsel Renda and C. Max Kortepeter (eds.), *The Transformation of Turkish Culture. The Atatürk Legacy*, Kingston Press, Princeton, 1986.
- 8 Cf. Rasheed Araeen, "Our Bauhaus, Others' Mudhouse," in: *Third Text*, 6, pp. 3–14, (spring) 1989.
- 9 Hassan Khan, "Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East/The British Museum," in: *Bidoun*, 8, (fall) 2006, pp. 114–5.
- 10 Cf. Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2006.
- 11 Cf. Nat Muller, "Revealing: New Media Art According to Laura Marks," (interview), in: *Metropolis M*, 4, 2008, pp. 28–9 (English version available online at: <http://www.metropolism.com/magazine/2008-no4/interview-with-laura-u.-marks/> (access December 29, 2008)).
- 12 "Islamic Art Now," in: *Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, available online at: http://www.lacma.org/islamic_art/ian.htm (access October 7, 2007).
- 13 Alan Riding, "The British Museum's Mission: Cultural Ambassador to the World," in: *The New York Times*, July 1, 2006.
- 14 Lilian Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art. 1910–2003*, American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 2005, pp. 127–30.
- 15 Khosrow Hassanzadeh, "How Did I Become a Painter?," in: Mirjam Shatanawi (ed.), *Tehran Studio Works: The Art of Khosrow Hassanzadeh*, Saqi Books, London, 2007, p. 30.
- 16 Sohrab Mahdavi, "Terrorist," in: Shatanawi 2007, p. 124.
- 17 Mirjam Shatanawi, "The Disquieting Art of Khosrow Hassanzadeh," in: *ISIM Review*, 18, (Autumn) 2006, pp. 54–5.
- 18 Mirjam Shatanawi, *Islam in beeld. Kunst en cultuur van moslims wereldwijd*, SUN, Amsterdam, 2009.
- 19 Actually, director Liesbeth Brandt Corstius turned out to become one of the pioneer collectors of non-Western contemporary art in the Netherlands.
- 20 Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2004.
- 21 Susan Legêne, "Heritage and the Politics of Nationalist Discourse," Keynote speech ICOM General Conference, Vienna, August 19, 2007, unpublished.
- 22 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Norton, New York, 2007.
- 23 Koos van Brakel and Susan Legêne, *Collecting at Cultural Crossroads: Collection Policies and Approaches at the Tropenmuseum*, KIT Publishers, Amsterdam, 2008.
- 24 Oguibe 2004, p. 166–7.
- 25 "Actually I don't think of myself as the Colin Powell of the art world: A discussion with Akram Zaatari, Hassan Khan and Tirdad Zolghadr," in: Tirdad Zolghadr (ed.), *Ethnic Marketing*, JRP Ringier, Zurich, 2006, pp. 89–90.

